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Essentialism, Culture, and Power: Representations of Social Class

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*This article argues that beliefs about social class are influenced by power and social location. Using an essentialist theory of power this study explores the asymmetries in the representations of social class among Brahmins (*N = *99) and Dalits (former "Untouchables,"* N = *100) in India. The results show that a significantly higher number of Brahmins believed that a poor man's brain transfer to a rich man would not affect his actions, whereas they believed the poor man's actions would be affected by the brain transplant from the rich man. Dalits did not selectively endorse essentialist notions of identity. The implications of the findings are discussed in conjunction with current empowerment and affirmative action programs for Dalits in India.*

Integrating the current research on psychological essentialism (Gelman & Wellman, 1991; Hirschfeld, 1996) and power (Fiske, 1993; Fuss, 1989; Grosz, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Stoler, 1995), I propose a theoretical synthesis, an essentialist theory of power that is sensitive to the interaction between social location (Crenshaw, 1995) and cognition. Using this perspective, I describe a study conducted in Tamilnadu, India that compared upper- and lowest caste members' beliefs about social class. This article is in three parts. In the first part, I outline an essentialist theory of power. In the second part, using a brain transplant paradigm, I

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demonstrate the asymmetries in the representations of social class in Tamil Nadu, India. Finally, I discuss the relevance of these findings for higher educational reform in India offering courses that foster a critical engagement with caste and its nexus to systemic oppression of marginalized caste groups.

Theoretical Perspective

Psychological Research on Beliefs about Social Class

In psychological research, social class is typically treated as a categorical variable (socioeconomic status—SES). In other instances, research on poverty explores the impact of impoverished social context on mental health and other psychological outcomes (see McLyod, 1998). Not many studies look at how social class is conceptualized by members from various ethnic and social strata. Most psychological research on conceptions of social class focuses on describing the developmental differences in the conceptions of social class. The two dominant views of children's understanding of social differences have been influenced by the Piagetian approach to cognitive development and Moscovici's (1984) theory of social representations. Research driven by the Piagetian paradigm describes the developmental changes across different age groups in children's conceptions of what socioeconomic differences are (Connell, 1977; Leahy, 1983a, 1983b). The focus of the social representation perspective, however, has been on examining the role of children's social experience (at various class-levels) in influencing children's conception of class (Dickinson, 1990; Emler & Dickinson, 1985).

Both approaches have their shortcomings. Piagetian stage theory has been criticized by recent findings in developmental psychology that demonstrate that even younger children (age 4–5) have an elaborate theory-like understanding of social categories (Gelman and Wellman, 1991). The social representation perspective fails to account for how and why a social representation becomes salient among a number of social representations available in a social milieu. Its normative and value-neutral treatment of social representations also does not examine the role of social hierarchy and power in the creation and perpetuation of a demeaning social representation.

Power differentials among various social groups and their access to resources might affect how an individual conceptualizes social class (Omvedt, 1993, 1995). Theories of social class are influenced by social location, such as a person's caste, class, and gender. Also, they are embedded in a particular social and cultural matrix (Mahalingam, 2001; Omvedt, 1993; Thiruchandran, 1997). What is needed is a social cognitive perspective that addresses the cognitive representational aspects of social class, yet is sensitive to the social location and power differences among various group members. A review of social cognitive research on categorization

and research on power might help to develop an interdisciplinary perspective that incorporates the representational and structural dimensions of social cognition.

Essentialism, Power, and Theories of Social Groups

According to Medin and Ortony (1989), essentialism is a psychological process in which people's representations of things reflect a belief that things have essences. Gelman, Coley, and Gottfried (1994) define psychological essentialism as an implicit assumption people have about the structure of the world and how it is represented in our categories. Essence is also thought to be the underlying causal mechanism for the properties that we see in any living beings. Current research on essentialism focuses on delineating the developmental changes in children's understanding of social categories such as race (Hirschfeld, 1996), caste (Mahalingam, 1998), and gender (Taylor, 1996).

Cognitive psychologists view essentialism as a cognitive bias that enables the creation of social categories (Hirschfeld, 1996). The ideological import of essentialism is rarely explored (Mahalingam, 1998). Research on essentialism uses the following three paradigms to investigate a person's essentialist beliefs about social categories: (a) adoption paradigm (Gelman & Wellman, 1991; Hirschfeld, 1996), (b) transformation paradigm (Keil, 1989; Mahalingam, 1998), and (c) brain transplant paradigm (Johnson, 1990; Mahalingam, 2001). The adoption paradigm pits nature vs. nurture to examine beliefs about innate potential. The transformation paradigm examines beliefs about the essential attributes that constitute a category membership through various manipulations of the external and internal characteristics of a living organism (e.g., dogs, rabbits, squirrels). The transformation paradigm tests whether change in any external or internal features might alter category membership (Keil, 1989). The brain transplant paradigm invokes folk beliefs about change in personality and social identity by using a thought experiment in which a brain transplant occurs between members of different social groups. The findings from these three (adoption, transformation, and brain transplant) paradigms suggest that psychological essentialism is a heuristic bias that helps us to navigate our complex world. All these paradigms document the emergence of essentialist thinking in our folk theories about living kinds.

In contrast, social constructivists are skeptical about such claims that essentialism is simply a heuristic bias that helps us to make sense of the world (Fuss, 1989). They have typically viewed essentialism as a mechanism for preserving social, political, and economic power (West, 1993). Social constructivists argue that characteristics of race and gender are viewed as essential categories, meaning the essential characteristics of members of these groups cannot be altered by any social input. Such reasoning tends to justify and perpetuate social inequalities (Fuss, 1989; West, 1993). Social categories such as race, gender, and sexuality,

historically, have frequently been constructed to assert a biological basis for group differences, in an effort to maintain social and political hegemony (Appiah, 1990; Davis, 1991). While the biological notion of essentialism has a strong intuitive appeal, Goldberg (1993) cites many other forms of essentialization:

> The minimal significance race bears itself does not concern biological but naturalized group relations. Race serves to naturalize the groupings it identifies in its own name. In articulating as natural ways of being in the world and the institutional structures in and through which such ways of being are expressed, race both establishes and rationalizes the order of difference as a law of nature . . . . In this way race gives to social relations the veneer of fixedness, of long duration—even silently—the tendency to characterize assent relations in the language of descent. As such, group formation seems destined as eternal, fated as unchanging and unchangeable (p. 81).

Feminist scholars argued that essentialism also played an important role in naturalizing gender hierarchies. According to Grosz (1994)

> Women's essence is assumed to be given and universal and is usually, though not necessarily, identified with women's "biology" and "natural characteristics." There are cases in which women's essence is seen to reside not in nature or biology but in certain given psychological characteristics—nurturance, empathy, supportiveness, non-competitiveness Essentialism thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibility of change and thus of social organization (p. 84).

Both quotes describe the deployment of an essentialism that highlights fixed characteristics of gender and race that cannot be changed by historical or social conditions. Such essentialist assumptions can become a means of preserving the status quo and abolishing programs that attempt to engineer social change (e.g., affirmative action). Most social constructivist accounts use dominant narratives, such as colonial government documents, to support their claim that essentialism and naturalization of hegemony go together (Hirschfeld, 1996).

In summary, while highlighting the historical nature of power, social constructivist accounts tend to ignore how a social category is represented in an individual's mind (Mahalingam, 1998). On the other hand, cognitive essentialist accounts tend to ignore the issue of power. If essentialism is our cognitive bias, social constructivist accounts make it clear that it has been exploited for the legitimization of power at the macro-level. Yet they are inadequate in delineating how individual cognition is shaped by power.

Psychological research on power and cognition offers some valuable insights about the role of power in influencing our belief systems. Fiske's (1993) pioneering work on power shows that power holders are more likely to pay attention to category-based information (i.e., essentialized stereotypical aspects) to evaluate an individual, whereas judgments by those who are not in power were based on more individuating and contextual information. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) argue that dominant group members are more likely to endorse beliefs that justify arbitrary group-based hierarchies (e.g., race or caste) than members of marginalized groups. There is a convergence between social constructivist critiques of

essentialism and psychological research on power. Both underscore the dominant group members' tendency to essentialize group membership as well as group hierarchies.

If dominant group members are more likely to essentialize group differences, then how do members of marginalized groups ever resist such degrading essentialist accounts? Do they passively accept such essentialist notions of social groups? In several studies, I examined beliefs about caste in India and race in the United States. I found that the Brahmin (upper caste) participants believed that caste was fixed at birth, whereas the lower caste Dalits believed that caste identity was acquired through socialization and resisted the essentialization of caste (Mahalingam, 1998). In another study that compared beliefs about genetic causes of racial differences in the United States, we found that the majority of White students believed that IQ was primarily influenced by genes whereas the majority of Black students believed that IQ was largely influenced by environment (Mahalingam, Philip, & Akiyama, 2001).

Based on the existing interdisciplinary research as well as my own work on essentialism, I outline an *essentialist theory of power* (ETP) that integrates research on psychological essentialism, power and social constructivist approaches to beliefs about social representations. The following are the characteristics of an essentialist theory of power: (a) Essentialism is a general purpose cognitive mechanism that is an integral part of our folk theories of social groups (Hirschfeld, 1996); (b) Essentialism can manifest in three different modes—*biological* (differences are perceived to be rooted in biology through inheritance), *social* (differences are perceived to be transmitted through socialization but become an essential part) and *transcendental* (differences are carried over from previous birth perceived to be, see Mahalingam, 1998 for a discussion); (c) Recruitment of any of these modes of essentialist construals is influenced by social location and power (Fiske, 1993; Hirschfeld, 1997; Mahalingam, 1998; Stoler, 1995); (d) In general, dominant group members (males, Whites, Brahmins, heterosexuals) are more likely to essentialize group differences and group hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999); (e) Dominant group members are, also, more likely to invoke a biological notion of essence, inherited at birth (e.g., beliefs in biological mechanisms such as those transmitted by "blood," DNA, or genes) than marginalized group members (Appiah, 1990; Mahalingam, Philip, & Akiyama, 2001); (f) Marginalized group members are likely to resist essentialized representations of social groups that are rooted in biology (Fuss, 1989); (g) Marginalized group members are likely to invoke social (non-biological) essentialist explanations of group differences (Mahalingam, Philip, & Akiyama, 2001); (h) Different social identities (i.e., race, caste, gender, and class) will be essentialized to varying degrees (Mahalingam, 2002); (i) There will be asymmetries in the dominant group members' selective essentialization of group identities for ideological purposes and the manifestation of these asymmetries is influenced by culture (Mahalingam, 1998).

Testing all the complex dimensions of ETP is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I extend ETP to study conceptions of social class among Brahmins and Dalits. I will focus on how social class is conceptualized by Brahmins and Dalits using a brain transplant paradigm. A brief description of the cultural context and the caste system will be followed by the description of the study.

Culture, Caste and Social Change

India provides an ideal cultural context to study the relationship between essentialism and power. Caste hierarchy plays a pivotal role in the regulation and production of various social interactions. The caste system is a social division in India that stratifies various social groups, with a set of upper castes, "backward" castes, and the most oppressed group, Dalits. Brahmins are the uppermost caste, enjoying the benefits of the privileged social group for centuries. Dalits are the lowest caste group and have been treated as "untouchables" for a number of centuries. Parish (1997) describes "untouchable" identity as a relational and an oppositional identity.

> "Untouchables"—defined in part by the opposition of pure and impure—define who they are in opposition to their collective definition, in opposition to the "Brahman," the "Hindu," the dominant order and its ideology (p.173).

Dumont (1980) claimed that caste hierarchy, maintained through ritual pollution and purity, is internalized by all caste groups. Such claims of internalization of hierarchy have been challenged by several scholars (Appadurai, 1986; Dirks, 1987; Raheja, 1989). The political shift at the end of colonialism contributed to a change in caste relationships. After gaining independence from the British Government in 1947, the Indian government instituted a policy of affirmative action to ensure that the Dalits would not be left behind. While affirmative action has been a central tenet of the Federal government, the policy has been implemented to varying degrees in different parts of the country, because of the lower social power of "backward" (historically underprivileged) and Dalit castes.

In Tamil Nadu, a southern state, the society is organized in a three-tier caste system. The upper tier includes caste groups such as Brahmins (priest and white collar caste) and Vellalas (landowning caste). The middle tier consists of caste groups such as *Thevars*, and *Vanniyars* (small landowning castes and blue collar workers). They are also designated as "backward" castes by the State Government—the groups historically denied opportunities for social mobility but not subjugated to the stigma of "untouchables." The bottom tier includes former "untouchable" castes that are identified as Dalits, who were given federally mandated reservations (quotas) for education and jobs. In Tamil Nadu, a "backward" caste party, DMK (*Dravidar Munnetra Kazagam*—Dravidar Progressive Organization) came to power in 1967. For all college admissions, including engineering, medical, and law school admissions, the DMK government implemented the reservation

policy more aggressively than the Northern States, which were mostly ruled by Brahmins and other upper caste political leaders. Job reservations in all government agencies for "backward" and Dalit castes were instituted by DMK. Subsequent governments continued to follow the reservation policies of DMK. As a result, a small middle class of Dalits is emerging in Tamil Nadu. Still, the majority of Dalits lives in poverty and in some of the Southern districts of Tamil Nadu they are still stigmatized (Deliege, 1992).

Previous research on caste groups (in the sixties), particularly on Dalits, in Tamil Nadu suggests that Dalits have accepted the essentialization of caste (see Deliege, 1992 for a review). Based on his ethnographic work in Tamil Nadu, Deliege suggests that in the late 1980s and 1990s the social mobility and empowerment programs instilled a sense of pride among Dalits. He cites, also, the emergence and political significance of the Dalit Panther party in the 1990s (modeled after the Black self-respect movement in the United States) as evidence for the social mobility of Dalits in Tamil Nadu. Education and affirmative action contributed to the social mobility of Dalits. Social movements started by Dalits invigorate a positive self-affirmation and challenge many stigmatized views of Dalits. While a large number of Dalits are still poor, a new generation of Dalits who has benefited from the affirmative action quotas and redefine Dalit identity has emerged. They are proud of their identity and demand social respect. For instance, middle class Dalits in Tamil Nadu proudly mention their caste in the marriage invitations (e.g., "Narayana *Pariah* cordially invites you and your family to grace the occasion of his daughter's marriage"). There are Dalit candidates who use campaign posters that proudly display their caste identity. Given the current social and economic mobility of Dalits, Tamil Nadu provides an ideal context to explore the complexities in the representations of social class. Since Brahmins and Dalits represent the top and the bottom strata of the social hierarchy, it, also, provides an opportunity to examine the role of social hierarchy and power in beliefs about social class. The following section describes the study that compared Brahmins' and Dalits' beliefs about social class.

Description of the Study

Purpose of the Study

The primary goal of this study is to examine the theories of social class in a generation of Dalits who enjoyed the benefits of affirmative action in the form of reservations (quotas) for Dalits. Brahmins still maintain their high social and economic status all over India (Omvedt, 1995; Parish, 1997). Brahmins are characterized as intelligent and "brainy." The brain is stereotypically associated with the intellectual prowess of Brahmins both in the popular media representations as well as in folklore. For instance, in a famous classical play, *Hayavadana* (Karnad, 1975), the female Brahmin protagonist is torn between choosing two men, one who

is brainy (a Brahmin) and the other who is physically strong (a warrior). She wishes for an ideal man, with the head of the Brahmin and the body of the warrior (which comes true in the later part of play!). Stereotypically, Dalits have been viewed as physically strong and athletic. Considering the prevalence of such stereotypes, the brain transplant paradigm is an effective methodological tool that can be used to investigate Brahmins' and Dalits' beliefs about social class.

This study uses the brain transplant paradigm to compare Brahmins' and Dalits' beliefs about social class. The study addresses the following questions: (a) Are there caste differences in the folk theories of social class? (b) Do men essentialize social class more than women? An essentialist theory of power (ETP), predicts that more Brahmins will essentialize class identity than Dalits and that more Brahmin men, the occupants of the top social hierarchy, are more likely to essentialize social class than other groups.

Participants

This study employed a 2 (caste: Brahmin, Dalit) $\times$ 2 (gender: male, female) $\times$ 2 (story type: version A, version B) between-participants design. An approximately equal number of participants from each caste group (99 Brahmins and 100 Dalits, $N = 199$) participated in the study. Two hundred participants from Brahmin and Dalit castes with an equal number of males and females were recruited. All participants were from a Hindu middle class socioeconomic background. Professional organizations, such as Bank Employees Association, were approached to ensure that the participants were from an income bracket (equivalent to about $200 a month) that is considered middle class in India. The participants were interviewed at a location and a time of their convenience. All participants had a college degree. The data were collected from the southern city Madurai, which is about 250 miles South of Madras, the state capital of Tamil Nadu.

Procedure

For the brain transplant task, each participant was randomly assigned to a group. They read either a story of a poor man who got a brain transplant from a rich man (Story A) or a story of a rich man who got a brain transplant from a poor man (Story B). The stories are as follows.

Story A

Kathan is a poor man and Kumar is a rich man. Someone takes Kathan's brain, puts it in Kumar's head, takes Kumar's brain, and puts it in Kathan's head. After, the brain transplant, is ***Kathan*** going to act like

a) a rich man

b) a poor man

Story B

Kathan is a poor man and Kumar is a rich man. Someone takes Kathan's brain, puts it in Kumar's head, takes Kumar's brain, and puts it in Kathan's head. After, the brain transplant, is ***Kumar*** going to act like

a) a rich man

b) a poor man

The interviews were conducted in Tamil. The story and the questions were translated into Tamil by one bilingual translator. The instrument was translated back into English by another bilingual researcher to verify the accuracy of the translation. Changes were made until both researchers agreed on the accuracy of the Tamil version. The participants were asked to choose only one answer. Four native speakers were hired as research assistants. They were trained to conduct the interviews. The participants were requested not to discuss this study with their friends or colleagues.

Dependent Measures

The participants' answers were analyzed by response type. For instance, for Story A, the response that Kathan (who is a poor man to start with) is going to act like a rich man (choice a) was counted as a "will change" response, because the brain transplant affected the way Kathan would act. The response that Kathan is going to act like a poor man (choice b), was counted as a "will not change" response, because the brain transplant did not affect the way Kathan would act. The coding for Story B followed a similar logic. If the target person, Kumar (who is a rich man after the transplant) will act like a rich man, the response was counted as a "will not change" response. If Kumar changed to act like a poor man after the transplant, that was counted as a "will change" response.

Results

Chi-square analyses were run on the "will change" and "will not change" responses. When the two patterns of responses were crossed with two story types for all respondents in a chi-square analysis, there was a significant difference in the pattern of responses across the story conditions with more "will change" responses associated with Story A and more "will not change" responses for Story B, $\chi^2\,(1, N = 199) = 10.26, p < .001$.

To check whether the different response pattern for stories was valid for each caste, a separate chi-square analysis crossing the choice of response by story type found a significant difference in the Brahmins' response patterns for the two story types. A significantly higher number of Brahmins believed that a poor man would act like a rich man if he got a brain transplant from a rich man. Also, Brahmins

Table 1. Frequency of Responses by Story Type

	Story Type (transplant direction)		
Response Type	Story A—Rich to Poor	Story B—Poor to Rich	Total
Will Change	55 (56.5%)	33 (33%)	88
Will not Change	44 (43.5%)	67 (67%)	111

believed a rich man's behavior would not change if he received a brain transplant from a poor man, χ^2 (1, $N = 99$) = 17.4, $p < .001$.

Separate chi-square analyses of the response patterns of Brahmin males and females found similar story effects for Brahmin males as well as for Brahmin females. Both Brahmin males, χ^2 (1, $N = 49$) = 13.2, $p < .001$, and females, χ^2(1, $N = 50$) = 5.23, $p < .02$ (see table 2) thought that the brain transplant would affect the poor person, but not the rich person. Although there were equal number of "will change" and "will not change" responses among Dalits, when the response patterns of Dalit males and females were analyzed separately by story type, a nonsignificantly greater number of Dalit women than men thought that a brain transplant from a poor man to rich would not affect the rich man's behavior (see Table 2.).

In summary, there is an asymmetry in the pattern of responses for Brahmins that was influenced by the story type. Brahmins essentialized the rich person's identity (i.e., rich person would not be affected if the brain came from a poor person) but not the poor person's identity. Although the Dalit responses were not influenced by the story type, an almost equal number of their responses implied an essentialist notion of identity as those implying a fluid, non-essential notion of identity (i.e. about equal number of "will change" and "will not change" responses).

Discussion

Using a thought experiment, a brain transplant between a rich individual and a poor one, this study explored the folk theories of social class among Brahmins and Dalits. It was predicted that Brahmins would tend to essentialize social class and Dalits would tend to see social class as being a product of an individual's life situation. Brahmins were more likely to invoke such essentialization of identity when the protagonist was the rich man. They selectively invoked an essentialist notion of the social class identity, and they attributed more power to influence behavior (agency) to the rich person's brain than to the poor person's brain. For Brahmins, a rich person's brain is more likely to change how a poor person acts, whereas a poor person's brain will not have the same influence on the behavior of a rich person. A poor person's social identity was thought to be permeable to a brain transplant from a rich person. The irony is that if the material condition of the poor person does not change, he cannot afford to act like a rich person. Contrary to

Table 2. Brain Transplant and Class—Frequency Counts of Responses by Caste, Gender and Story Type

	Story A—Rich to Poor		Story B—Poor to Rich		
Caste	Will change	Will not change	Will change	Will not change	Chi-Square
Brahmin Men	17 (68%)	8 (32%)	4 (16.7%)	20 (83.3%)	$\chi^2(1, N = 49) = 13.2$, p < .001
Brahmin Women	15 (60%)	10 (40%)	7 (28%)	18 (72%)	$\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 5.23$, $p < .02$
All Brahmins ($N = 99$)	**32 (60%)**	**18 (40%)**	**11 (22.4%)**	**38 (77.6%)**	$\chi^2(1, N = 99) = 17.4$, $p < .001$
Dalit Men	12 (52.1%)	11 (47.9%)	14 (50%)	14 (50%)	$\chi^2(1, N = 51) = 0.02$, *ns*
Dalit Women	11 (42.3%)	15 (57.7%)	8 (34.7%)	15 (65.3%)	$\chi^2(1, N = 49) = 0.29$, *ns*
All Dalits ($N = 100$)	**23 (46.9%)**	**26 (53.1%)**	**22 (43.3%)**	**29 (56.7%)**	$\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 0.416$, *ns*

the prediction, half of the Dalits did essentialize class identity. Unlike Brahmins, Dalits essentialized both the rich and poor identity.

The essentialist theory of power posits that dominant group members will essentialize social identities. The findings lend some support to this claim. The asymmetry in these representations of rich and poor reflect the underlying ideological beliefs about the nature of social hierarchies. The primacy of the brain as an important organ, only when it is associated with the rich, and not with the poor, may be linked to equating privileged class to privileged caste in Brahmins' worldviews. Dalit men's responses did not attribute more agency to the rich man's brain than to the poor man's brain. Thus the direction of the transplant did not influence their judgments. For Eagleton (1991) and Fuss (1989), the asymmetry in the representations of social categories as well as the modes of justifications of social differences provide strong evidence for the discursive and ideological nature creating certain social categories such as race, class, and gender (Eagleton, 1991).

Another important issue is the role of social location in the construals of social class. This study highlights the significance of social location in delimiting the various beliefs about social categories. Crenshaw's (1995) discussion on intersectionality reminds us of the complex intersections of class, race, and gendered identities and their mutual influence on our cognizance, our embodied experience, and our worldviews. The influence of the story type was significant for Brahmin men and for Brahmin women (see Table 2.). The similarities in the responses between Brahmin men and women suggest that an intersection between caste and gender (Brahmin male) had an influence in shaping beliefs about social class. Further research is needed to understand the interaction between caste and gender.

The response pattern of Dalits suggests the prevalence of two conflicting folk theories of social class identity among Dalits: (a) some Dalit participants rejected essentialist notions of social identity, a form of resistance (b) other Dalit participants endorsed an essentialist notion of social class, somewhat similar to the responses of Brahmins. What are the reasons for resistance to and endorsement of essentialist representations of social class? The current historical conditions affecting the lives of Dalits might help us to understand the various predicaments of Dalit middle class (Omvedt, 1995).

This dual response pattern (rejecting as well as endorsing essentialist conceptions of social class) resonates with the two dominant modes of identity politics of the Dalit middle class. One such mode is a *rejuvenation* mode that celebrates and reasserts all Dalit arts (music, dance, and theatre) that were marginalized and denigrated by the dominant Brahminical culture as folk arts (Anandi, 1995; Fernandes, 1996; Joshi, 1986; Omvedt, 1995). Social mobility among Dalits has resulted in a cultural renaissance of their identity and literature and political empowerment (Deliege, 1992; Murugkar, 1991). They have been more organized in establishing their culture, folklore, and history (Anand & Zelliot, 1992). Perhaps

the overall social awareness and empowerment of Dalits, particularly among the educated middle class, could explain the resistance to the essentialization of social class.

Another mode is an *assimilation* mode that reflects another dominant trend among middle class Dalits, whereby they participate in all classical art forms that were denied to Dalits for thousands of years. By accessing and participating in the dominant cultural forms, many middle class Dalits emulate the practices and behaviors of the dominant caste, the Brahmins, a phenomenon known as *Sanskritization* (Srinivas, 1962). According to Srinivas (1962), an eminent Indian sociologist, whenever there is a social mobility for members of a lower-caste group, they try to act like the upper caste. For example, an upwardly mobile Dalit may become a vegetarian, learn Indian classical music and attend classical dance (*Bharatanatiyam)* concerts, the stereotypical practices of Brahmins. In the past few decades, the strict implementation of reservation (quota) policies resulted in the upward mobility of Dalits (Anandi, 1995; Deliege, 1992; Fernandes, 1996; Padamarau, 1999). Perhaps Sanskritization is the process through which the Dalits can assimilate and gain social legitimacy and approval from their upper-caste peers in their social interactions. This process could explain why some Dalits' responses were similar to that of Brahmins.

On the other hand, Marxists have argued that oppressed members of a social group often believe in legitimizing ideologies because of a "false consciousness" (Jost, 1995) that prevents them from developing a critical consciousness about the structural arrangements that perpetuate social inequalities (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, 1995). While false consciousness is typically associated with the oppressed groups, it could be extended, also, to the dominant groups. Brahmins' belief in privileged notions of their own identity to map any social hierarchy should also be seen as "false consciousness" that is self-serving and that naturalizes systems of hierarchies.

Personal beliefs and ideology of dominant group members can mediate and often contest essentialized representations (Deliege, 1992). While there is a link between Brahmins' privileged status and their essentialist beliefs about social class, it is important to note that several Brahmin intellectuals have been actively participating in organizing Dalit workers for better pay and treatment since the formative years of the leftist movement in Tamil Nadu (Gough, 1960). If the study were conducted among Marxist Brahmins, who are ideologically committed to an egalitarian state, they may well have responded in a way similar to Dalits.

Education, Empowerment and Social Location

Years of caste-based reservations in education and jobs have resulted in the emergence of a small Dalit middle class (Deliege, 1992). Yet it is not very clear whether reservations and quotas translated into the empowerment of Dalits. The

reservations in higher education and jobs opened the doors for social mobility for Dalits. It also resulted in some ambivalence in terms of their social empowerment and recognition because the higher education among Brahmins did not raise their critical awareness about caste hierarchies.

What are the goals of education? Can mere access to education alone lead to empowerment? Social change through the empowerment of marginalized groups is a complex process. Education should provide not only the tools for employment for marginalized groups but also opportunities to raise their critical awareness of social hierarchies (Freire, 1970). They should be able to resist and contest essentialized representations of social differences (Freire, 1970; Fuss, 1989). Similarly the dominant group members need to develop a critical consciousness to understand the historical exigencies in creating, perpetuating, and sustaining various essentialized representations of social groups, such as caste, class, and gender (Fuss, 1988; Grosz, 1994).

So far, higher education in India promotes instrumental learning and fails to encourage students to critically engage with social issues related to caste, gender, or social class (Talesra, 2001). The professional (engineering, medicine, and law) as well as the arts and science curricula (except sociology and anthropology) do not include any courses on the sociological or psychological aspects of caste, gender, or class (Mahalingam & Ramakrishnan, 2002). I argue that the educational policy for Indian higher education should include a curriculum that critically engages with social issues and problems related to caste and gender and it should be mandatory for professional, arts, and science majors. The social science courses on caste, gender, and social class should be part of a curriculum for all higher education programs (Mahalingam & Ramakrishnan, 2002). A more inclusive curriculum will greatly enhance the possibilities of fostering a critical awareness of issues related to caste and gender among dominant group members to facilitate social change. The curriculum should provide opportunities for students to participate in discussions challenging the essentialist notions of caste, gender, and social class and raising awareness about the link between power and essentialization of social hierarchies. Such steps toward developing a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) are crucial to the post-reservation phase of empowerment, where the members of the upper caste and Dalits should both critically engage with the issues of caste, gender, and social class.

Limitations

This study did not include poor Dalits, who are still going through everyday personal degradations because of their caste origin. It would be interesting to examine how poor and oppressed Dalits might respond to this task. Perhaps as a result of the internalization of hegemony, they might respond more like Brahmins, or they might resist essentialized representations. Open-ended qualitative life history

interviews of Dalits and Brahmins from various social strata exploring their own material success and beliefs about class would provide interesting insights about the very notion of social class and privilege; how they are intertwined with social location and personal life experiences. As a first step in that process, this article makes a modest attempt to capture the impact of social and cultural renaissance among educated Dalits, using a theoretical perspective that integrates beliefs about essentialism and social power.

Conclusion

In this article, I proposed an essentialist theory of power. Using a brain transplant paradigm, I examined folk theories of social class of Brahmins and Dalits. The study indicates that Brahmins, particularly Brahmin men, believed in the inalterable nature of privileged social class identity, whereas lower-caste participants do not make such a distinction between rich and poor class identity. The findings suggest that social location and privileged group membership affect a person's implicit theories of social groups. The participants from the privileged group selectively essentialized social class. Social location also plays an important role in folk beliefs about social class. In addition, this study demonstrates the role of power in our conceptions of social categories.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995) is central to the study of social class. This study suggests that people from different social locations and historical contexts might think of social categories differently. Intersectionality must be conceptualized as a dynamic, historically constituted, embodied experience of people who occupy different coordinates of power along axes of race, class, gender, and caste. Cultural narratives emerging from these locations are crucial for understanding the relationship between social changes, shifts in power dynamics, and notions of social class identity.

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